

The Prison Notebook of Captain James M. McNeill, C.S.A.

By Louise McNeill Pease

James Monroe McNeill, farmer, carpenter, Confederate infantry captain, and war poet, was born at Buckeye, Pocahontas County, Virginia (now West Virginia) on May 9, 1823. He was the son of William (William-the-Teacher) and Nancy Griffey McNeill. His mother was the daughter of Johnathan Griffey, a Swiss mercenary who had come to America with Lafayette.

James McNeill, "Grandpa Jim", grew up on the family farm at Buckeye, Pocahontas County. He remembered seeing the wild pigeons — how all day long, flying over, their wings darkened the sun. Almost his first memory was of the big and the three smaller Indians who came to his mother's cabin when he was five or six years old. He remembered, too, going to "pay school" and cutting his bare feet on the crick ice. The "pay school" was a mile or so up the "crick," and one winter morning when he was going to school — dressed only in a flaxen shimmy shirt — he cut his feet on the ice, cutting them till they bled, and when he got to the schoolhouse, the teacher wrapped them in rags and had him sit by the fire.

When he grew to manhood, Jim McNeill followed the trade of a carpenter and cabinetmaker. In his twenties, he was married to a neighbor girl, Sarah Young, and built her a log house near the "spring up the hollow." But Sarah died in childbirth, and their infant child died with her. After this tragedy, Jim McNeill left Pocahontas County though he did not sell the farm. He went over to Nicholas County where he worked as a carpenter for many years and where, in the spring of 1861, he joined the Nicholas Blues, was given the rank of Captain, and went to fight with the Twenty-Second Virginia Infantry, C.S.A.

Colonel George S. Patton, "grandfather of General George S. Patton of World War II fame," was commander of the Twenty-Second Virginia. Colonel Patton was killed at Winchester, but Captain Jim fought under him at the Battle of White Sulphur Springs, where he first met — when she was serving coffee to the Rebel soldiers — my grandmother, Frances Perkins, a young war widow.

Captain Jim's last fight was to be at the Battle of Droop Mountain on November 6, 1863 — the fall that General W. W. Averell and his some 5,500 Federals came through the Allegheny pass. On the evening before the battle, the Rebels on the mountain top could see the Yankee campfires burning in the Little Levels of Hillsboro. There were too many campfires, and the Rebels waited for a bad day.

It was the night before the battle that my grandfather, who as a boy had hunted squirrels all over Droop Mountain, went to his com-

manding officer with the information that there was, near their encampment, an old road around the west side of Droop. Captain Jim told the commanding officer that, by way of this wood road, the Yankees could flank the Confederate Army. The commanding officer listened and then told my grandfather that if the Virginia command wanted any advice from a Captain they would let him know.

The next day, the Yankees flanked the Confederates by way of the old wood road, and the overwhelmed Rebels "retreated in confusion toward Lewisburg." In the melee, Jim McNeill was captured and started on his long journey to Fort Delaware. Driven north along the Droop road with the prisoners, he met his Yankee brother, Al, hurrying south with the Federal troops. "Howdy, Jim," said Al with a kind of narrow, Scotch-Irish triumph. But the Captain didn't even nod. "The Rebels ain't speakin' today." He looked straight ahead of him and went on to Fort Delaware prison where he was held prisoner till June 13, 1865.

There at the Fort, some of the hungry prisoners cooked and ate rats, but Captain Jim would never cook or eat one. It was one of his last prides that he had never eaten a rat and never intended to eat one. But, somehow, there he got hold of a pen and a little brown notebook and—with only a few months of "pay school" for his literary stylistics—began to write poems.

The notebook is a small, ledger-like book, some six by four inches in size, and is faded and torn. It has lain undisturbed in the top drawer of a black walnut highboy these 100 years and is filled with jottings and poems.

Some of the poems are good poems, and many of them are written from a war prisoner's point-of-view. The long, lyric "Virginia Land" has a note scrawled along the margin: "Tune—Maryland, My Maryland."

It is known, from other written records, that Captain McNeill wrote war songs before his capture and that these songs were sung by the Twenty-Second Virginia around their campfires.

Five of the poems from the ledger book are printed below. A photostatic copy of the brief "Mid Fearful Woes Arose A Star" is reproduced on page 183. After his release from prison, Captain McNeill was brought by freight car to Staunton, Virginia. From there he walked "home" to Nicholas County. Later, he "removed" from Nicholas back to the old family farm at Buckeye. In 1873, he married the war widow (Fanny Perkins), who had served him coffee at the Battle of White Sulphur Springs. Their only son, my father, was born in 1877, and was named George Douglas—named for Colonel George Patton and for Stephen A. Douglas, the union Democrat for whom Captain Jim had voted in the vital election of 1860.

Captain Jim lived till March 26, 1911. I was born three months before he died. He was born in the Administration of James Monroe and lived to the Administration of William Howard Taft. They car-

ried me to his bedside for him to see, and I have lived to see Armstrong walk on the moon. It seems only a short time and too short for my great-great grandfather, Johnathan Griffey, to have come over with Lafayette. But here in Appalachia, times are short between the Indian war party and the blast-off at the Cape. When I found the notebook, it was in the drawer we always called "Grandpa Jim's drawer," and down in the drawer was a bunch of old tax tickets and bullets and a bullet mould and rusty nails and dust and ancient pumpkin seeds. I dusted the book off and have it here to copy. It tells of the hope and despair of a prisoner at Fort Delaware prison from November 1863 to June 1865. Then, at the last, one Rebel poem tells of what it was like to be home again in "Nicholas, Virginia, August 30, 1865." The state of West Virginia was formed on June 20, 1863, but Captain Jim was never a man to eat rats.

"Virginia Prisoners at Fort Delaware—Tune Maryland, My Maryland"

Wandering thoughts turn home again
 To view our native war worn plane
 She marshaled at the bugles sound
 One hundred thousand on the ground
 To their homes are honor bound
 Virginia's land, etc.

Inscribed her banners victory
 Her watchword death or liberty
 Her hills have shook from shore to shore
 Her plains are drenched with human gore
 Her vetrans fall to rise no more
 Virginia's land.

She points to fiend atrocity
 And justice sues for liberty
 Peace has fled and sorrows reign
 Widows weep for husbands slain
 Orphans cry for food in vain
 Virginia's land.

THERE COMES A WALE . . .

There comes a wale from Carnage dread
 A sorrow ore our gallant dead
 They met the foe with daring pride
 And braved the battle's angry tide
 On the altar nobly died
 Virginia's land.

They captives doomed to monarch's rein
 How long have we to wear the chain
 We're periled fortunes fearful tide
 Have bowed to despots haughty pride
 Our duties claims not satisfied
 Virginia's land.

Though sundered far from southlands fair
 Enthralled in godless Delaware
 Yet we love thy sacred plain
 And proudly boast immortal fame
 And glory in Virginia's name
 Virginia's land.

I'VE WANDERED . . .

I've wandered many weary miles
 Since first I saw thy sunny smiles
 And many more I yet must roam
 Far from the lonely seens of home

In many tented fields must sleep
 And many a midnight vigil keep
 The day of battle looms before
 The headlong charge, the canon roar

Starn freedom's columns stand unmoved
 While bleding round falls friends I've loved
 The deadly hail falls in our lines
 The soldiers death will soon be mine

I ask thee not to weep for me
 Though happiest thoughts are all of thee
 Nor that your lovely eyes should shed
 One tear of sorrow ore the dead

But should you in a coming day
 Once think of him whose mouldering clay
 Hath for its shroud the battle sod
 Staned with many a hero's blood

Then think of him who was to you
 In every thought and action true
 As one who loved thee unto death
 And blessed you with his latest breath

Now lovely girl adieu farewell
 My fate or fortune none can tell
 If I nare return to thee
 O Lovely girl remember me.

"Mid Fearful Woes Arose A Star"

*Mid fearful woes arose a star
 Turnkey to our prison bar
 Its feeble rays grew bright and fair
 Unlocked the bars of deep despair
 Dispursed the woes of Lplaware
 At Lplaware April
 March 16th 1861*

WILLIE

My Willies on the dark blue sea
 He's gone far ore the main
 Any many a weary day will pass
 Ere hel come back again

Corus. Then blow gentle winds
 Ore the dark blue sea
 Bid the storm king stay his hand
 And bring my Willie back to me
 To his own dear native land.

There's danger on the waters now
 I hear the bloodbills cry
 And moaning voices seem to speak
 From ort the cloudy sky.

I see the vivid lightening flash
 And hark the thunders roar
 Oh father save my Willie from
 The storm kings mighty power

And as she spake the lightenings ceased
 Hushed was the thunders roar
 And Willie clasped her in his arms
 To roam the seas no more.

Now blow gentle winds oer the dark blue sea
 No more we will stay thy hand
 Since Willies safe at home with me
 In his own dear native land.

MY LIFE . . .

My life is like a scattered wreck
 Cast by the waves upon the shore
 The broken mast and rifted deck
 Tell of shipwreck that is o'er
 Yet from the relics of the storm
 The mariner his bark will form
 Again to tempt the faithless sea
 But hope rebuilds no bark for me.

My life is like the blighted oak
 That lifts its seared and withered form
 Scarred by the lightening hidden stroke
 Sternly to meet the coming storm.
 Yet round that sapless trunk will twine
 The curling tendrils of the vine
 And life and freshness there impart
 Not for the passion blighted heart.

My life is like the desert rock
 In the mid ocean lone and drear
 Worn by the wild waves ceaseless shock
 That round its base their surges rear,
 Yet there the sea moss still will cling
 Some flower will find a cleft to spring
 And breathe ore these a sweet perfume
 For me life's flowers no more will bloom.